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BUILDING ARTS ORGANIZATIONS THAT BUILD AUDIENCES

A Wallace Foundation
Conference



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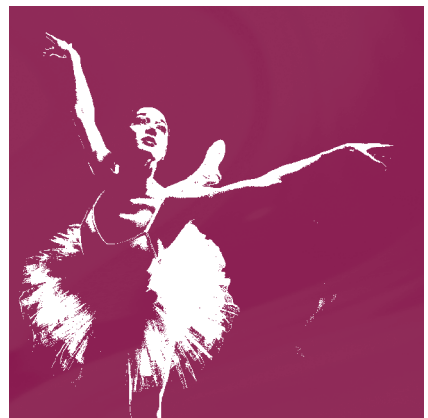
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BUILDING ARTS ORGANIZATIONS THAT BUILD AUDIENCES



Introduction

Since its earliest days as a national philanthropy in the 1990s, The Wallace Foundation has been committed to making the arts a deeper part of more people's lives. Today Wallace does this through two different grant initiatives: [arts education](#), which supports more and better arts learning opportunities for children, and [audience development for the arts](#), through the Wallace Excellence Awards – the subject of this report.

The awards, launched in their current form in 2006, have supported 54 exemplary arts organizations in six cities – Boston, Chicago, Philadelphia, Minneapolis/St. Paul, San Francisco and Seattle – to design and carry out projects to encourage more people to enjoy the benefits of the arts. Our idea is that if such projects are guided by reliable data-gathering and analysis, they will stand a better chance of succeeding than if they unfold in the absence of such work. Wallace emphasizes information- and idea-building in other ways, too. To help award recipients learn from each other and outside experts, the foundation periodically holds conferences bringing the grantees together to talk among themselves and hear what others have to say. This publication documents the most recent of those meetings.

In addition, Wallace has supported research about the Excellence Awards projects so that the lessons the grantees are learning about what works – and what doesn't – in developing audiences may be shared widely in the arts community. The first of these [Wallace Studies in Building Arts Audiences](#), individual case studies looking at the Wallace Excellence Award projects carried out by a girls' chorus, a museum, an opera company, and a theater company, were published in 2012. The studies, along with "online extras" documenting the work of the organizations, are available free of charge at www.wallacefoundation.org.



Building Arts Organizations That Build Audiences

By Susan Parker

Few would argue that the last few years have been kind to arts organizations. An economy that entered recession in 2008 is showing only faint signs of recovery four years later, and arts groups, like other nonprofits, continue to feel the squeeze.¹ But along with the worries about how to keep cash flowing during tough economic times, arts groups have had to contend with a more intractable problem: Rates of participation in a number of major art forms have been steadily eroding over the last generation or so, with declines most pronounced among those 30 and under – the presumed audiences of the future.²

There's not much arts organizations can do to stop a global economic meltdown. But as groups with creativity in their DNA, can they take steps to make the arts a bigger part of more people's lives? If so, how do they make sure that this work endures?

In June 2011, a conference called *Building Audiences: Sustaining What Works* sought to provide some answers to those questions. The Chicago gathering, sponsored by The Wallace Foundation, brought together representatives from the 54 recipients of the Wallace Excellence Awards, a grant program that has helped exemplary arts groups in six cities design and carry out projects to build participation in the arts. Together with researchers, experts in nonprofit management, and marketing and communications mavens, the Excellence Awards grantees discussed their audience development projects and tried to make sense of what they have learned to inform their audience-building work in the future.

Their discussions should resonate with any arts organization grappling with audience development. "Our goal is simple," Daniel Windham, Wallace's arts director, told the 150 conference participants assembled June 7 to 9: "to help give you ideas about how to sustain what is working."

WHAT DO AUDIENCES EXPECT FROM ARTS ORGANIZATIONS?

The event opened with a lively exchange of views on the very role of arts organizations in 2011 and the question of whether arts groups help – or stand in the way of – what people expect from an encounter with the arts today. Throwing down the gauntlet was Ben Cameron, program director for the arts at the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, who asserted that modern audiences want to be more than passive recipients of art that someone else has decided is good for them. "Just as the religious reformation challenged the necessity of the intermediary priest in a spiritual relationship," he told the conference, "many in today's arts reformation question the necessity of a professional artist in a creative artistic experience."

The goal of the gathering was to share ideas about how to sustain what is working in audience development.

¹ Holly Sidford and Marcy Hinand Cady, "Arts Funders and the Recession: A Year Later," *GIA Reader*, Fall 2010. <http://www.giarts.org/article/arts-funders-and-recession-year-later>

² Laura Zakaras, Julia F. Lowell, *Cultivating Demand for the Arts: Arts Learning, Arts Engagement, and State Arts Policy*, RAND Corporation, 2008, 2-3. <http://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/audience-development-for-the-arts/key-research/Pages/Arts-Learning-and-Arts-Engagement.aspx>

Arguing that arts organizations have a valued role as guides to help the audience engage with art was James Cuno, former president and Eloise W. Martin director at The Art Institute of Chicago and now president and CEO of the J. Paul Getty Trust. “What museums do best is to present works of art to people,” he said. “In some ways that is enough. The curatorial role is to choose to our best ability those works of art that we think are most important. The curator is not standing in front of the visitor but next to the visitor. Our job is to make everyone feel that this collection is for them.” It’s also a role that has served well over generations, Cuno asserted. “We benefit enormously today from decisions made by curators from 100 years ago,” he said.

Others weighed in, with Doug McLennan, editor of *ArtsJournal*, wondering whether curatorial views of arts organizations “allow for enough relationship,” and David Hawkanson, executive director of Steppenwolf Theatre in Chicago, drawing a line in the sand: Steppenwolf, he said, would not suggest that the audience should select the plays it produces nor would its audience want it to.

If conference speakers lacked consensus on the proper balance between the choices of arts presenter and audience, however, they found little to argue about on another point – that it is the power of art to touch the soul that lies at the heart of tapping greater engagement in the arts. To make the point, Cameron referred to the documentary movie “Restrepo,” which tells the story of a platoon of soldiers stationed in one of the most dangerous parts of Afghanistan. In one scene, shortly after a deadly firefight, a soldier pulls out a guitar and begins playing it, Cameron recalled. “People are scrambling for their lives and yet they are playing the guitar,” he said. “Sometimes we don’t appreciate what the arts might mean for us or how dependent we are on arts or how integral they are to the spirit. We need to pay attention to that power. [This is about] sustaining what art offers the individual spirit and offers human interaction.”

THREE ESSENTIALS IN PARTICIPATION-BUILDING

Building participation. Developing audiences. What do these terms mean? In recent years, Wallace and many arts organizations have used them as shorthand to describe one or more of three activities: “broadening” audiences (attracting more audience members like those currently attending), “deepening” them (enriching the experience of participants), or “diversifying” them (bringing new groups into the fold).³ Whichever of these goals is sought, however, the work of the Wallace Excellence Awards grantees suggests that arts organizations need to pay attention to three matters:

- Understanding audiences and figuring out strategies to “meet them where they are.”
- Involving the whole organization in audience development.
- Creating a culture that embraces experimentation and learning.

³ Kevin F. McCarthy and Kimberly Jinnett, A New Framework for Building Participation in the Arts, RAND Corporation, 2001. <http://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/audience-development-for-the-arts/key-research/Pages/New-Framework-for-Building-Participation-in-the-Arts.aspx>

UNDERSTANDING AUDIENCES

Arts organizations that want to build their audiences need to understand their audiences. That requires market research, and a number of conference participants talked about how gathering data – through focus groups, surveys or other methods – had been crucial to their work.

As part of its effort to develop a deeper connection to those who attend its shows – and, thereby, generate more support for the organization – Steppenwolf conducted research to get to know its theatergoers better. What it discovered was that those who attend the challenging works Steppenwolf is known for (the theater is not a *Hello Dolly* kind of place, as one

staff member put it) consider themselves lifelong learners. Steppenwolf’s response was to begin holding a post-show conversation after each performance. While audience discussions are not unusual among theaters, this one was different. Rather than telling the theatergoers what they “should” see, the discussion leader coaches audience members to explore questions that come up for them about the plays. This seems to have paid off. Some 20,000 people now stay behind for post-show discussions every year, and in one two-year period that the theater studied, the number of non-subscribers buying tickets to more than one performance grew by 61 percent to 2,281 households.⁴

Rather than tell theatergoers what they “should” see, [Steppenwolf] helps audience members explore questions that come up for them about the plays.

Listen first, then respond

Almost no adult expects a conversation with a resistant teenager to be pleasant. And indeed, when the Pacific Northwest Ballet set up teen focus groups, “we heard some things that were hard for us to listen to,” said Ellen Walker, director of marketing and communications at Pacific Northwest Ballet at a panel on sustaining market practices. Still, she noted, the comments were “important for us hear.” The ballet employees learned, for example, that what they had thought was a clever and funny promotion for a Christmas-season chestnut, *The Nutcracker*, was instead, inscrutable to the kids. They also took issue with the graphic quality of the ad, likening it to “bad Photoshop.” The staff found, too, that everything from the price of tickets to the company’s Web site navigation to the perceived formality of the ballet was keeping away young people. “They also told us they thought that ballet was stuffy and elitist and you had to wear a fur coat to go,” Walker said.

The findings were at the heart of a project to combat stereotypes about ballet among teenagers and break down other barriers preventing kids from attending. The company brought younger people into their studios to watch rehearsals and sponsored teen-only events. It also launched a young critics workshop where local dance critics helped teach teens about critical feedback. These young critics now write blogs on performances, which are posted on

⁴ Bob Harlow, Thomas Alfieri, Aaron Dalton, and Anne Field, *Wallace Studies in Building Arts Audiences: Building Deeper Relationships: How Steppenwolf Theatre Company Is Turning Single-Ticket Buyers into Repeat Visitors*, Bob Harlow Research and Consulting, LLC. 2011, 1-2. <http://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/audience-development-for-the-arts/strategies-for-expanding-audiences/Pages/Wallace-Studies-in-Building-Arts-Audiences.aspx>

the – yes, redesigned – Web site. In addition, the ballet began conducting more outreach to Teen Tix, Seattle’s performing arts membership club for teens. Teen Tix members are greeted warmly at the ballet box office and by the front-of-house staff, and are seated throughout the auditorium rather than being relegated to the most inexpensive seats in the second balcony.

Listening and responding to the voices from the community was essential to efforts at Fleisher Art Memorial, a visual arts school. Its goal was to attract more people from the African American, Southeast Asian and Latino communities in southeast Philadelphia, where Fleisher is located. At the panel on organizational learning practices, Magda Martinez, Fleisher’s director of programs, talked about a multiyear audience research program that was designed to inform the effort.

Fleisher originally planned to bring in more neighbors through an after-school program, an all-day summer session and several weekend family festivals. But in the interval between submitting their proposal to The Wallace Foundation and receiving the Excellence Award, Fleisher’s staff members realized that their proposed plan “reflected what we *thought* the community needed or wanted,” Martinez said. “What we realized pretty quickly was our assumptions were not as well informed as they needed to be. We simply did not investigate the community need thoroughly enough.”

Once they did start asking, through focus groups and neighborhood surveys, Fleisher’s employees discovered that many in the neighborhood were unfamiliar with the institution or didn’t fully trust it or felt unwelcome when they entered. “We had to change our behavior

and attitudes,” Martinez said. “Engagement of communities is about building relationships. We couldn’t ask people in the community to change their behavior and attitudes if we didn’t do the same. The whole project has been transformational for all levels of staff, from custodial to executive. We read summaries of our research at every staff meeting. We developed brown bag lunch training sessions that all staff was required to attend that focused on language accommodations, cultural sensitivity and creating metrics.”

Staff members also had the smarts to seize a good opportunity when it presented itself. One of the focus group members was a neighbor who had the respect

of families throughout the area – and who became a Fleisher fan. Fleisher enlisted her as a bridge to the community. She organized and brought families to register for free Saturday children’s programs – people who might not have come without her encouragement and guidance, Martinez says.

The upshot?

Three themes emerged from the research: Come to us. Show us. Welcome us. They now underpin Fleisher’s community engagement programming, which includes Colorwheels, a mobile art studio that goes to places where people congregate, such as parks and soccer fields, and offers them family art projects.

Through efforts including enlisting a neighbor to act as a bridge to the community, Fleisher carried out a “transformational” project.

Upending conventional wisdom

The power of data to spur changes in direction was felt, too, at Seattle's Experience Music Project, a museum that explores creativity and innovation in popular music and science fiction. In fact, market research ended up overturning the strongly held belief by curatorial and programming staff members that their exhibitions appealed solely to adults. The research was kicked off after Patti Isaacson, deputy director, saw something that flew in the face of the conventional wisdom and suggested that staff members come in one Saturday to have a look for themselves. "They saw that in our biggest hall, we had to cordon off almost half of it for stroller parking so families could get through the exhibit," Isaacson said in an interview.

Probing further through market research, the museum found out that families with children were not only a presence but the largest part of the museum's audience. The data also highlighted barriers that this key audience was encountering. "We heard from moms that it was hard to bring their children," Isaacson said. "They couldn't take strollers through the galleries, they couldn't bring backpacks with juice and snacks, and they couldn't sit down."

One result was a decision to plan an exhibit featuring games for young visitors, complete with clues at toddler level. "We used the data we collected to move away from deeply held gut instincts about who we thought our audience was," Isaacson said.

Isaacson noted that some museum staff members were wary of doing the market research, fearful that if the data showed that a large percentage of museumgoers were young families then the museum would have to become a children's museum – something they did not want to happen.

But Isaacson made the case that assisting an audience was not the same thing as changing an artistic mission. "If you don't want to be a children's museum then you can make operational and programming choices to enable families that are coming to be able to participate more," she said. "A sustained use of data can help you intentionally plan as opposed to feeling that you have to be reactive or make decisions that you don't want to do."

"They saw we had to cordon off almost half of our biggest hall for strollers so families could get through the exhibit."

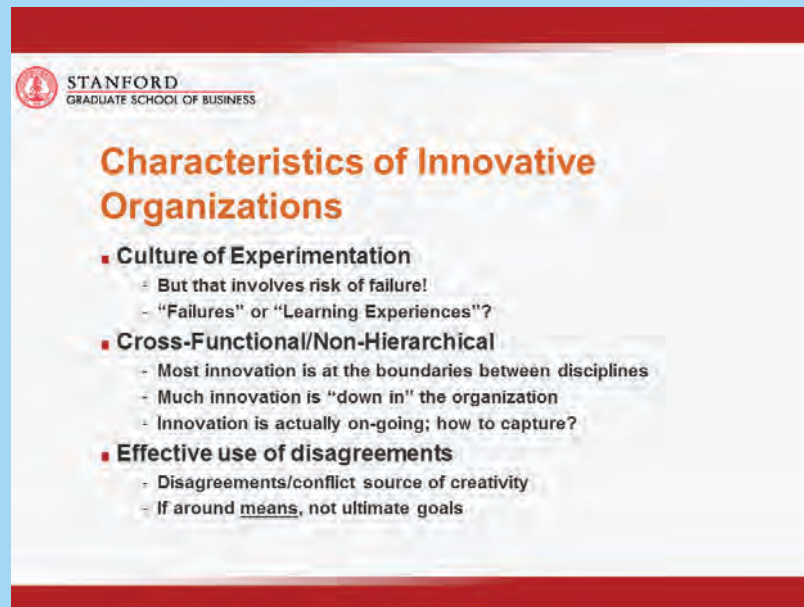
INVOLVING THE WHOLE ORGANIZATION

If arts organizations want to change their audience interactions, they often need to change themselves, too, conference panelists and participants said. The Wallace grantees have taken steps including forging stronger bonds between the management and artistic sides of the house and allowing staff members greater autonomy. Organizations also have tried to encourage more collaboration among their different departments. "You can't change the quality of the relationship between the audience and the organization unless you change the quality of the relationship within the organization," said John Holden, an associate at the Brit-

SPURRING INNOVATION

Like many arts groups, museums face obstacles to making change happen, David Bradford, a Stanford University senior lecturer emeritus in organizational behavior, told attendees at the conference. Staff members can become locked in their roles – as a marketer or curator, for example – failing to understand the roles of others, says Bradford, who has done much work with arts organizations. That makes collaboration difficult. Organizations may also lack problem-solving mechanisms. Bradford recalled what happened when he showed museum directors in Australia a video of a meeting where two people argue heatedly. When Bradford asked the directors how they should respond in a similar situation, the group said, “Tea break!”

One of Bradford’s slides shows a possible route to innovation:



“You can’t change the quality of the relationship between audience and organization unless you change the quality of the relationship within the organization.”

ish think tank Demos and expert in cultural management, in a speech, “Adapting and Sustaining Effective Practices.”

Allison Crean, a founding partner in the New Legacy Partnerships consulting firm, said that three key factors must exist for change to occur in an organization: opportunity (the chance to do things differently), capacity (the skills to carry it out), and incentives (ways to provide motivation). “You need to have all of these elements,” Crean said. “If one is missing, you see anxiety or people just can’t make the change. You’ll see confusion, resistance, frustration and false starts. For example, you may have the opportunity for change in place, but if the capacity isn’t there or the incentives are weak the probability for sustainable success will be low. These factors are important for organizations to consider as they craft and execute new processes or programs.”

Change starts at the top

Building audiences requires firm backing from the leadership of arts organizations, conference speakers said. And “leadership” is broadly defined; board members, for example, can be surprising sources of help, expanding their traditional functions of governance and fundraising into cheerleading and providing links to a wider community. Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, a contemporary arts center in San Francisco, has

tapped this potential in part by recruiting younger board members and people of color – a way to bring an infusion of fresh ideas and perspectives, according to Ken Foster, the group’s executive director. He spoke at a panel on sustaining organizational learning practices.

Particularly vital are the president and senior staff members, as the MacPhail Center for Music, a Minneapolis-based music school and performance organization, has discovered. MacPhail President and COO Paul Babcock has been a passionate advocate of getting the organization to embrace audience-building ideas that emerge from market research, according to Barb Plunkett, MacPhail’s marketing director, and his commitment has reverberated throughout the organization.

“Paul built the customer-centered approach into the way we do business,” Plunkett said during a session on data collection. “It was incorporated into each of our annual plans and the annual operating plan. It became operationalized with check-ins throughout the year. An unexpected outcome of focusing so completely on the customer has been an organizationwide paradigm shift. Now it’s very common to hear an employee ask, ‘Is this what the customer wants?’”

“Now it’s very common to hear an employee ask, ‘Is this what the customer wants?’”

Leadership means the artistic side of the house, too, attendees said. Take the Greater Philadelphia Cultural Alliance, which has set an ambitious goal of doubling cultural participation in the Philadelphia area by 2020 and is intent on enlisting the assistance of artistic leaders to help. “The people who have historically attended our events have been disproportionately marketing and executive folks,” said Tom Kaiden, the alliance’s president, in an interview. “The people who have not been as present are the artistic directors and curators. They are the ones who have the greatest control over the product. And the product or the experience has the greatest influence on people coming. We need to think about who is shaping the product.”

Bringing in artistic directors or curators to take a leadership role in building new audiences has another advantage. “Artistic directors can help us ask new questions,” Kaiden said. “There may be questions that management hadn’t thought of that help give patrons more of a voice.”

All hands on deck

The people with senior titles are not enough. Effective audience-building requires all hands on deck, a number of conference speakers said, noting that active staff involvement can have big payoffs.

For one thing, staff members can serve as the organization’s eyes on the ground, noticing things that people in management or the artistic divisions do not. Just ask Steppenwolf’s Hawkanson, the theater’s executive director. He recalled the efforts of the front house manager (now director of audience experience), who realized that the theater, which was running several programs through its three venues, was so busy that people began having parking

Brush Up Your Shakespeare: A Venerable Theater Company Renews Itself

In 2003, the renowned Royal Shakespeare Company faced one of the toughest moments in its storied history, beset by problems including poor morale, a multi-million-dollar deficit and scathing reviews of its productions.

Onto this stage in Stratford-upon-Avon entered two people determined to oversee a turnaround: Michael Boyd, artistic director, and Vikki Heywood, executive director, according to John Holden, who co-authored a case study of what happened in “All Together: A Creative Approach to Organisational Change.”

Their measures included reducing the sense of hierarchy at the theater company, in part by cultivating the notion of an ensemble in which all staff members played a vital role. Among other things, the leaders expanded the number of people in meetings and increased the size of the artistic planning team from three to 27.

The leaders also sought to boost interaction among different units of the organization. Departments received more authority to control and plan their work; several units merged; senior managers’ offices were spread around the building; and the organization encouraged clubs on topics ranging from gardening to yoga. All this increased the chances that staff members from different departments would bump into each other and make a connection. “The company also set up lots of opportunities to learn, to go on job shadows, to do department show-and-tells, to let voice coaches learn about marketing,” Holden said.

Through many other small changes and experiments, according to Holden, the theater regained its footing. By 2008, it could boast improved morale, a surplus of \$2 million – and audiences and critics that were applauding once more. The point? If you want to change your relationship to your audience, you need to consider changing yourself.

problems. His solution? On evenings when he expected congestion, he alerted audience members by e-mail and suggested that they consider coming earlier for a drink or trying alternative parking garages. “The feedback was just incredible,” Hawkanson said. “It was his idea – carrying the conversation on with customers and preparing them for coming to the theater. It was a no-brainer and had a giant impact.”

Then there was the MacPhail teacher who noticed a common trend in inquiries about her class on singing basics: Many adults declined to sign up once they found out about the course recital. Simply put, they did not want to sing in public. After listening to the potential students’ concerns, the teacher eliminated the recital and her classes filled up, Plunkett said.

Cultivating a “we’re-all-in-this-together” mentality requires work. Plunkett noted that shortly after she started as marketing director, she met with every department in MacPhail to begin to establish trust and find out where the staff struggled. She soon discovered that many employees, including those in student services, felt they lacked the power to respond when a customer was unhappy. Instead, they had to get permission from a top executive. One result of her listening tour was a new policy in student services, where employees now have the authority to help dissatisfied customers through common sense solutions like waiving registration fees or giving away tickets to concerts. “Once the organization made it clear to student services staff that its goal is to make sure that people are happy and satisfied, staff felt invigorated,” Plunkett said.

A CULTURE OF LEARNING AND EXPERIMENTATION

Learning to learn – it’s not easy

For organizations to build and sustain audience participation successfully, they must also foster what organizational management gurus like to call “a culture of learning” – an atmosphere that encourages employees to assess their work, use disagreement effectively, innovate at the boundaries of departments and take risks.

Organizations with learning cultures “are constantly listening to the environment, are willing to experiment and innovate and step back and evaluate and modify plans,” said Leslie Crutchfield in her keynote address, “How Arts Organizations Need to Change to Stay Relevant and Remain Resilient.” Crutchfield is a senior adviser at FSG Social Impact Consultants, a consultant to nonprofits, and co-author of *Forces for Good: The Six Practices of High-Impact Nonprofits*.

That is not to say that becoming a learning organization is easy. In fact, said Foster, the executive director of Yerba Buena Center for the Arts: “It’s really hard, it’s extremely messy and there is not a linear thing about the process.” Foster said that at Yerba Buena, a learning culture means that the organization does not set out with a grand plan but rather operates by instinct and response to the environment. “We’re like a squishy amoeba and we are adjusting constantly,” he said. “There is nothing static and nothing fixed.”

As part of his push to create a learning culture, Foster created an innovation team with junior and senior staff members to test out small ideas. He has also brought together people from different departments. “The rest of the organization sees that the world is not coming to end when someone in the marketing department is working with someone in the domain of curators,” he said. “These ideas are helping advance our organization.”

Such “cross-functional” experiences can fuel new ideas, said David Bradford, management author and senior lecturer emeritus in organizational behavior at Stanford University, noting that innovation

often occurs at the boundaries of different types of knowledge such as biotechnology. At the same time, cross-functional experiences are often difficult to come by in arts organizations, where interaction among people from different departments can be rare, he said.

Not all efforts at building a learning community meet with success. One common problem, conference participants said, is a failure in many arts organizations that conduct research on audiences to share the data widely so that the whole staff can learn from the findings and act accordingly. And sometimes managers need to try out various approaches to organization-wide learning before hitting on the right one, as the Seattle Repertory Theatre found out with its three-year experiment in annual, all-staff “open circles.”

“The rest of the organization sees that the world isn’t coming to end when someone in marketing is working with someone from the domain of curators.”

The idea was to familiarize the group's 100 or so employees with what goes on outside their departments by gathering everyone in the lobby to decide on discussion topics, break into discussion groups, and then reconvene to share the insights with everyone. One problem was that employees were shy about mingling with people outside their departments, so the costume department employees, say, tended to stick together and discuss only issues that affected costume work. Another problem was that people didn't have the authority to do anything with whatever suggestions arose. "At the end of the event, we had a laundry list of things to do but not the people power to follow up," Robert Knop, the theater's marketing and audience development director, said in an interview.

What has worked better, Knop said, are brown bag lunches tied to upcoming productions. In these sessions, which are open to all board members and employees, members of the artistic staff, production team or marketing department discuss an aspect of the production. The talks give staff members a deeper understanding of the productions and enable them to get an "elevator pitch" that they can share with others who may be interested in attending.

Experimentation is good; that means failure is, too

Organizations that value innovation live with the uncomfortable notion that some ideas are bound to fall flat, according to Bradford, the management author. "Innovative organizations have a high failure rate because they experiment a lot," he said. "You want to fail early and fail often." Bradford pointed to how arts organizations can adopt this mindset: doing small experiments; having a strong, consistent vision from leaders; and finding ways to clearly support failure so people will take risks.

Demos' Holden, meanwhile, said it is important to make clear that there is a big prize that comes from learning and taking risks. "People need to know how their life will be better as well as that of the audience," Holden said. "If you are not in crisis, you need a bold, powerful, simple statement that says what you are doing and why you are doing it."

Steppenwolf takes experimentation so seriously that it raises specific funds for "artistic enhancement" and calls it "risk capital." "I think we have enough evidence of how this kind of working capital impacts the ambition and scope of our work on stage to attract such funding beyond our ongoing sustaining needs," said Hawkanson. "In Chicago, risk capital is not a new idea in our investment community. It's a very understandable concept and need."

The Minnesota Opera company provides a textbook example of what experimentation looks like, having tried two different broadcast promotions and ended up with two different results. When the company found itself scrambling to fill seats for a production of an obscure German opera, it hit upon the idea of a 500-ticket give-away from a local radio host with a large audience of women 35 and older, a demographic group the company was pursuing. The promotion proved such a success that the opera company began offering free tickets regularly through the show, and the company has been able to move some of the people who redeem free tickets "up the ladder" to buy \$20 tickets, then half-price tickets and finally subscriptions, said Katherine Castille, the opera company's marketing manager and a panelist at a session on sustaining marketing practices.

Then the company decided to try the same tactic with a local television show that also has a large following among women. This time, however, results were disappointing. What matters,

“Innovative organizations have a high failure rate because they experiment a lot.”

however, is the lessons learned from the different promotions. Among them: In the case of the radio show, the host was an opera lover whose enthusiasm apparently rubbed off on his listeners. Not so for the television hosts. “What we’re finding is if you are trying to have an advocate in the media, you have to find someone who is already a fan of your organization,” Castille said.

In its experiments with ZIP code-based promotions, ODC, a contemporary dance company and dance school, has learned another lesson: that proximity does not necessarily translate

Old Museum Becomes Magnet for Young Adults

One Wallace Excellence Award grantee showed that even museums whose programming options are limited can respond creatively to attract and educate new audiences.

The Boston-based Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum focused its audience-building effort on increasing the number of younger visitors, a particular challenge for a 100-year-old institution that faces significant constraints. The museum is the legacy of Isabella Stewart Gardner, a late 19th century art patron who left her 2,500 works of art and the Venetian palazzo-style building in which they are housed as a museum on the condition that the arrangement of the galleries remain unchanged. Gardner had good reason for her rules; she wanted visitors to bring their own experience to the collection. But generations after her death in 1924, museum staff members began to worry that the institution, which like most other art museums had an older membership base, might have the reputation of being “fusty and dusty,” said Bob Harlow, who has studied the Gardner Museum’s effort. Harlow, a market researcher, is co-author of four Wallace-commissioned case studies of Excellence Award projects and was speaking at a conference panel about the reports.

The staff hoped to engage and inspire those under age 35 by creating an experience of the collection around the way that young people interact – in other words, a social event. But staff members believed that the After Hours program, as they called it, would falter if the attendees spent all night near the bar. To promote engagement with the art, they came up with activities ranging from group sketching in galleries to 15-minute talks by younger museum staff members and games that would help visitors connect with the collection and each other.

Not everything the museum tried worked. For example, a self-guided tour with written descriptions of the art did not go over well, said Julie Crites, Gardner’s program planning director until January 2012. “The light was low and reading was not something people wanted to do,” Crites said. “They wanted to interact with each other.”

But as a whole, the program succeeded. The After Hours events, held on Thursday evenings, regularly attracted more than 800 people. What’s more, data collected indicated that the museum attracted the audience it sought and that the new museumgoers sought out Gardner’s art offerings. Some 93 percent of the attendees visited the galleries and half said this – not drink-sipping – was the event activity they liked most.



Zip code marketing often didn't work. Why? It may be that "where people live is really incidental to how they choose art."

into bigger audiences. Located in San Francisco's Mission District, a home to artists, young professionals, and some of the trendiest restaurants in the city, ODC had data showing that its ZIP code contained the highest percentage of arts patrons in the area. "We took that as, 'Okay, we are in a great place,'" said Nancy Bertossa, marketing director at ODC. "It's just a matter of going out and getting their attention."

The dance organization carried out several promotions to local residents and businesses to entice people to attend performances or classes for a discounted fee. With

the exception of attracting some more dance class students, however, the efforts fell short of expectations, Bertossa said. The lesson? "We are in what should be a pot of gold ZIP code for arts [patrons], but if they are not contemporary dance people already you are not going to get them to come to contemporary dance," Bertossa said. "The fact that you are in the same ZIP code doesn't matter."

Eight or so of the Wallace Excellence Award winners tried "ZIP code" marketing – that is, marketing to a ZIP code in their areas – but almost never found the approach successful, according to Sandy Radoff, a consultant and technical adviser to the Wallace grantees.

"It was a failure for nearly all of the grantees," she said. "There was almost a romantic notion that you could get a bunch of people to walk to a venue to see art and this would create a sense of community. It seems logical but I don't think it conforms to how people make decisions. Where people live is really incidental to how they choose art. In some ways, the more avid a fan you are, the less crucial it is that you live nearby."

ZIP code strategies *might* work, Radoff said, but only if done slowly and carefully and by gaining a deep understanding of a neighborhood's needs and how those needs intersect with the work of an arts organization.

CONCLUSION

At the close of the Wallace conference, Daniel Windham, Wallace’s arts director, observed that arts organizations are at a moment of transition. Today is a time when, Demos’ Holden said, audiences want in varying degrees to “enjoy, talk and do.” The evolving environment challenges arts organizations to make smart and cost-effective decisions about strategies to attract and retain audiences, sustaining practices that work and modifying or dropping those that don’t. It also challenges organizations to change themselves in ways that encourage risk-taking, innovation and learning.

What emerged at the conference from John Holden, David Bradford, Leslie Crutchfield, David Hawkanson and others was that new practices – gathering data, sharing information, making meaning out of it together, and creating a learning culture in all parts of the organization – can help create the climate that fosters smart decision making about what to sustain.

Change is often incremental, Windham said, relying first on early wins and then on gathering an expanded base of support. Various institutions will take various approaches depending on their history and mission. But, Windham noted, all of this comes in service of an objective that transcends the differences: allowing more people to reap the benefits of the arts. “How do we help people find meaning and beauty in their lives is the question,” he said. “The meaning-making is what we are looking for.”

“How do we help people find meaning and beauty in their lives? The meaning-making is what we are looking for.”



Here and on facing page: Participants in an Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum After Hours event.

Related Wallace Products

Readers can download the following publications about arts participation for free at The Wallace Foundation's website at www.wallacefoundation.org:

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Cultivating Demand for the Arts: Arts Learning, Arts Engagement, and State Arts Policy, RAND, 2008.

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The Diversity of Cultural Participation: Findings from a National Survey, The Urban Institute, 2005.

Motivations Matter: Findings and Practical Implications of a National Survey of Cultural Participation, The Urban Institute, 2005.

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Reggae to Rachmaninoff: How and Why People Participate in Arts and Culture, The Urban Institute, 2002.

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